1: Grigson G-5 (1927-1934) 1949
AW32 Gond AW32
Hill Maria
Bison Horn Maria

CHAPTER V

CHARACTER

'Without exception they are the most cheerful, light-hearted people I have met with, always laughing and joking among themselves. Seldom does a Maria village resound with quarrels or wrangling among either sex: and in this respect they present a marked contrast to those in more civilized tracts. They, in common with many other wild races, bear a singular character for truthfulness and honesty, and when once they get over the feeling of shyness, which is natural to them, they are exceedingly frank and communicative. Curious as all savages, the commonest article of domestic use is to them an object of interest; they are quick to observe and to learn.'—Glasfurd's 1862 Report, para. 89.

'In their own hills they are a bold and hardy race, industrious as cultivators, and truthful to a proverb; and, though shy and timid with those they do not know, are quickly won over by kindness. They form, indeed, not only one of the most interesting, but one of the most improvable of the aboriginal tribes of India.'—Lucie-Smith's 1869 Chanda Settlement Report, para. 111.

MERCIFULLY the Hill Marias and, to a less extent, the Bison-horn Marias have been spared the attention of the improver, and hitherto have been left fairly free to develop on their own lines and to adjust themselves to the increasing impact of modern India on the surrounding lowlands. The shyness already mentioned is still very marked in the hills, and also among the remoter villages not only of Bison-horn Marias and Koyas, but also of Parjas and Murias. But the ordinary Bison-horn Maria of the open tracts, with the steady expansion of communications and frequent visits by the Chief and the Diwan to the Bailadila hills, has come more and more into contact with the outer world; he often comes into Jagdalpur for Dasehra or market or to work on the public works, or even to show his children the sights of the '*sahar*' or 'city', especially the power-house and the pumps of the new waterworks.

In the Abujhmar hills all is well if visitors are expected. Otherwise, as in Glasfurd's day, all the inhabitants are liable to rush off into the jungle on the sudden appearance of an unusual number of persons or a white man. When marching from Orcha to Adeq (Ader) in Chhota Dongar Mar *pargana* in February 1930, I left the main path to see the village of Tondawada. I was not expected in the village, and though I had with me a number of Maria youths from Orcha well known to several women of Tondawada, yet my approach was the signal for a general *sauve-qui-peut*; the dogs barked, the few cattle were hastily driven off into the hills, and women and boys fled helter-skelter to the hills, even including

1: Grigson G-5 (1927-1934) 1949
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609 157 a large party of women who had assembled to keen over an old woman who had just died. Pigs also were driven off, and a youth, who was caught lurking near us to 'rescue' three stray cows and brought to me, advanced to me as delicately as Agag, with his knife unsheathed and held in readiness to defend his life. This lad was quickly reassured and shouted out, whereupon to our surprise four or five other lads came down from trees around us, where they had taken shelter, their curiosity being on the whole stronger than their fear. Ultimately the women felt that the corpse could not be left unmourned any longer, and came back in twos and threes to be reassured by the boys. They were then in two minds whether to resume keening or to see as much as possible of the queer ways of so unheard-of an apparition as a white man. When I came to see the keening it was altogether too much, and they at once left the body and crowded round me; when I had it explained that I wanted to see how funerals were conducted and to photograph them, they very obligingly squatted down in their original places, and began even more doleful keenings than before. It seemed only proper to remove my distracting presence as soon as I could, but the keeners were with difficulty dissuaded from seeing me on my way to Adeq.

Timidity of this kind is unusual among the Bison-horn Marias; but there are many villages among them where few women can have seen a white man. To appear on foot or on a car along a forest road where groups of women are gathering forest fruits is usually the signal for them to rush off into the thickets, leaving their baskets and gear: but if you return that way later after having spent an hour or two in neighbouring villages, they will come timidly out to you on the road, and gradually lose their earlier fears.

152 The highlanders and lowlanders alike are extremely curious. In the Abujhmar hills I have frequently had parties of men, youths and girls coming into my tent or hut to see my strange ways of getting up, shaving and dressing, and their curiosity has been embarrassing when they have tried to watch even the performance of natural functions. I have had to brush my hair a dozen times over to satisfy those who had not seen me do it the first time, and to demonstrate the use of every article on my dressing or office tables. They will sit for hours watching a typewriter, and speculating on how it works. A motor-car is a source of endless delight, whether it be the distorted reflections seen in the polished radiator, or the noises of the bulb and electric horns. They thump it to test its materials, or crawl underneath to be fascinated by the strange sights that reward their trouble. But it takes time to get them to agree to try a ride inside, and when they do, they start off with

1: Grigson G-5 (1927-1934) 1949
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VII

I found it very difficult—and I suspect that Grigson had the same experience—to see Marias in action. Tribes vary greatly in their willingness to allow a visitor to be present at their ceremonial. The Murias used to invite me to marriages or festivals, sending information about them long beforehand. The Saoras are delighted to have visitors at their celebrations and more than once the ghost of a long dead headman has come upon the priest and admonished the people to treat me right. But the Bondos do their utmost to keep the stranger away; during the great summer festival they pile the paths leading to their villages with thorn bushes and not even a fellow Bondo, if he belongs to another village, is admitted. The Marias do not go so far as that, yet I found them singularly unwilling to let me watch them do anything. When I was camping at Borgum I heard that the Wijja Pandum was to be celebrated in two days' time and rather unwisely announced my intention of being present. On the morning of the festival a delegation arrived in camp to say that the proceedings had had to be postponed because the Perma's wife was in her period—though I darkly suspect that the old lady had in fact passed the climacteric. I had to dodge round the country for weeks before I saw a wedding, and to witness the Ghotpal Marhai I had to come sixty miles on an elephant down from the Abujhmar because the dates were changed at the last moment.

But since a page of personal observation is worth a whole chapter of hearsay I will describe the wedding at which I assisted and the great festival at Ghotpal in 1942.

On March 15th, 1942 I was camping in Gogonda at the edge of the hills overlooking the great southern plain. That evening, I was told, two girls were to be taken to Sirsitti, a village some two thousand feet below, to be married. At about five o'clock therefore married and unmarried women collected and began to dance with one of the brides. She had her head and shoulders completely covered with a shawl and wailed loudly all the time. Three pots of rice-beer were distributed to the dancers and a large number of onlookers, and then the dancers took the bride round the village. This was a very pretty sight. The circle of dancers would suddenly elongate into a line and then curl up again in a ring. As they danced from house to house, men and women would come out and put a ring on the bride's finger or a necklace round her neck and embrace her by raising her hands twice to their foreheads and then clasping her in their arms. As they did so, the dancers sang the names of the people who were giving presents and their exact relationship to the bride. At other times they sang how the girl had hitherto been going to and fro freely in the jungle, getting wood, husking grain,

1: Grigson G-5 (1927-1934) 1949
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doorway while his parents encouraged him and the old women shouted ribald jokes. At last he plucked up courage and made a dash for the girl. Her companions resisted him but at last, of course, he broke through them, seized the girl and dragged her weeping loudly into the house. The girls rushed after them and pushed and hustled them into an inner room and shut the door on them, the theory being that they would consummate the marriage there and then. The old women stood round the hut trying to look inside and discussing the bridegroom's potency. The cock which is often stolen by the bride's party from the bridegroom's house was here given as a present with a little cloth to the bride's younger sister.

This was the end of one marriage. The other was a surprise. The girls came dancing with the shrouded bride up to the house, the bridegroom put on a new shirt for the occasion, his mother brought water to wash the feet of her new daughter-in-law. Everything was ready, but after the girls had danced round once or twice in front of the house, they made as if to go right round it in honour of the Departed. Everybody waited for them to complete the circuit and return, but their voices grew fainter and fainter, and I went out to see them dancing away into the forest. It was then explained to the unfortunate bridegroom that certain ceremonies had to be performed in Gogonda to protect the bride against magical dangers with which she was threatened and that she would be returned to him in three days' time.

It was then six o'clock and we returned to camp.

VIII

On February 2nd, 1942 there was celebrated at Ghotpal near Barsur the great Marhai and Pen-Karsita of the Lekhami clan. Directly I arrived and made my camp under some trees I was greeted by a little deputation of local priests who told me very politely but quite firmly that though they were delighted to have me there I would not be permitted to take any photographs or write anything down. Later I went with Mr. Sampat Singh to the shrine of the Ghotpal clan-god, the Anga, Usendi Pen, with whom are his sons Hunga and Wella and his daughter Wange. I was at once surrounded by people telling me that I must not go inside. An elderly magician approached me and in a stern voice told me to take my hat off, for I was looking at a god. Such instructions are unusual in aboriginal India.

Nothing happened that day, but people began to assemble and many merchants arrived and set up their booths in a line along the edge of the great open dancing-ground in front of the shrine.

3: Elwin E-5 (1935-1942) 1943
AW32 Gond AW32
Bison Horn Maria

prisoners clearly suspected some trick and told me very little. On the whole I was impressed by the great sadness of their life, even though in the jail they are well and kindly treated. Most of them, I think, felt that an inexplicable tragedy had befallen them. They did not feel like criminals. Their lives had been destroyed by a capricious destiny.

It was naturally more difficult to get information about the suicides, for, in the nature of the case, the person of most interest could not be present to tell his story. Relatives also and the villagers were more reticent, I thought, in discussing this subject, possibly because they feared that any revelations might lead to further police investigation. But even so I was able to get a certain amount of information about the Maria's attitude to self-murder.

But enquiries among the Maria are never easy. The people say that, as a result of Mr Grigson's investigations when he was writing his book on the tribe, their villages have suffered an invasion of man-eating tigers. In one village where I myself took photographs it was declared afterwards that I had made all the women barren. The Maria are friendly people, and I was able to make many friends among them. But particularly on matters which have a police reference they are naturally inclined to be secretive and prefer to claim ignorance rather than by confiding in the investigator perhaps expose themselves to later difficulties. Moreover, there is undoubtedly throughout aboriginal India a belief that talking about tribal affairs may anger the ancestors of the clan or disturb some godling's peace of mind. It is said of Korava children, members of a criminal tribe in Mysore, that they are taught from infancy to say 'I do not know' in reply to questions put to them.[1] Many Maria adopt the same attitude.

The presence of my wife, whom everyone (incorrectly) regarded as a Maria but who has a Maria name, was of great assistance in removing suspicion, as was the fortunate chance that I always go barefoot in the villages. I learnt later that the Maria believe that one reason why the crops are so poor nowadays is that officials defile Mother Earth by trampling on her with their shoes. 'At first,' they said, 'when anyone

[1] L. K. Ananthakrishna Iyer, *The Mysore Tribes and Castes* (Mysore, 1930), Vol. III, p. 612.